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Recognising Secular Defilement: Douglas, Durkheim and Housework

Abstract

Mary Douglas is generally regarded as a faithful disciple of Durkheim. Yet her classic work *Purity and Danger* is best understood as premised upon a fundamental disagreement with Durkheim, who she accused of conflating purity with 'the sacred' and impurity with 'the profane'. Key to this disagreement was the theoretical status of the 'busy scrubbings' of everyday housework. This disagreement has had a substantial legacy since, in turning her attention to purity and impurity in their specificity, Douglas bequeathed anthropology and sociology a theory of purity and impurity that has remained an important, perhaps even dominant, paradigm. This paradigm has been identified as an exemplar of synchronic analysis. Yet this paradigm itself is the product of a specific historical and intellectual context, little recognised today. Attending to this context holds opens possibilities, which have otherwise tended to be neglected, for theorising purity and impurity in their specificity.

Keywords: Mary Douglas, Émile Durkheim, purity, defilement, sacredness

Introduction

Mary Douglas is rightfully taken to be in many ways 'faithful disciple' of Durkheim (Fardon 1987), and has described herself as such: 'As she expressed it in a radio interview', Douglas perceived that her 'problem has been to work with Durkheim's vision and to apply the most suggestive parts of his work towards a completion of his project' (Fardon 1987: 5). Yet this article will explore a foundational disagreement with Durkheim, which has been little noted by commentators who thereby misunderstand the premise of Douglas' work *Purity and Danger*. As O'Brien (2006: 9) has noted, the text is known for its 'famous dictum that dirt is "matter out of place"'. Whilst this dictum is repeated *ad nauseam*... its underlying theoretical and analytical context is invariably ignored'. Without awareness of this context, the decisive criticism of Durkheim staged by Douglas has been missed. Douglas' proposal that impurity attends breaches in cherished classifications has often been characterised as an exemplar of synchronic

anthropological theory (e.g. Maranda 1972); it is important to recognise, however, that this 'exemplar' has its own history – attention to which can deepen and potentially alter its meaning.

For, though it has been recognised by a few commentators on her work (e.g. Isenberg and Owen 1977), Douglas (1997) has expressed disappointment that the field has not generally recognised the stakes in her discovery of secular defilement, and attended to purity/impurity in their specific logic and social operation beyond their reduction to aspects of 'sacredness'. Without attention to the inadequacy of Robertson Smith's account of sacred phenomena, to which Durkheim, Franz Steiner and her own work were responding, she warned that scholars seriously risk missing 'the substance of what was going on in anthropology' in the period in which her account of purity and impurity germinated (Douglas 1999a: 8). Douglas was right to worry. As Riley (2005) and Lynch (2012) have observed, there remains today a tendency within, especially Anglophone, Durkheimian thought to neglect secular defilement – and to a lesser extent impurity generally (despite the influence of Bataille and Hertz in some quarters). There even remains a tendency to read Douglas' own work through this limited lens (e.g. Alexander 2006: 576). The article will begin by exploring the roots of Douglas's research questions in a debate between Robertson Smith and Durkheim. Whereas Robertson Smith had situated beliefs in ritual pollution as a mark of irrationality, Durkheim elevated impurity to equal theoretical status with purity in his idea of the 'ambiguity of the sacred'. Douglas argued against both theorists' conclusions, whilst utilising a Durkheimian method. She highlighted the significance of 'secular defilement', missed by Durkheim in his subsumption of impurity into a face of the sacred. As such, her famous statement that 'dirt is matter out of place' was not intended as the synchronic, totalising theory readers have often presumed. In fact, read in context this phrase is better understood as a provocation to the development of new reflections on purity and impurity in their specificity across domains of discourse and practice.

Impurity and anti-Semitism

"Now to confront our opening question. Can there be any people who confound sacredness with uncleanness?"

Douglas, *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002: 196).

Douglas' arguments about purity and impurity in *Purity and Danger* can be seen as a move in a game to which we have forgotten the rules; these arguments are still intelligible, but do not yield their full meaning. Among commentators, Klawans (2011: 108) is among the few to have recognised the significance of this opening question, which indicates that 'Douglas's arguments in *Purity and Danger* were addressed against a very specific target: the long history of Protestant antiritualism', as evidenced especially (but not exclusively) in... William Robertson Smith'. The first step in reclaiming this meaning is to identify more precisely the debate to which *Purity and Danger* began as an intervention. As Douglas ([1966] 2002: 196) explained in concluding the book, its 'opening question' was: 'Can there be any people who confound sacredness with uncleanness?'. This question relates to a debate between Durkheim and Robertson Smith, encapsulated within the famous page of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in which Durkheim announces his theory of the 'ambiguity of the sacred'. This page explicitly cites and stands generally in a vital intertextual relationship to a section – pages 152-3 – of Reverend Robertson Smith's (1894) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. The intertextuality of Durkheim's discussion of the 'ambiguity of the sacred' was well recognised by contemporaries of Durkheim, such as Van Gennep (1909: 12), but with the exception of Ruel (1998) has been missed by subsequent scholars who have treated the concept as originating with Durkheim and Mauss. In fact, in the first mention of the phrase by the Durkheimian school, Mauss and Hubert ([1889] 1964: 200) wrote of Biblical sacrifices in which 'the extreme sanctity of the victim finished up becoming impurity'. They explained this occurrence with reference to 'the ambiguous character of sacred things, which Robertson Smith so admirably pointed out'.

The passages from Robertson Smith and from Durkheim will be cited at length to make the intertextual conversation visible. In *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, Robertson Smith (1894: 152-3) had argued:

There is no part of life in which the savage does not feel himself to be surrounded by mysterious agencies and recognise the need of walking warily. Moreover all taboos do not belong to religion proper... but rather appear in many cases to be precautions against contact with evil spirits, and

the like. Thus alongside of taboos that exactly correspond to rules of holiness, protecting the inviolability of idols and sanctuaries, priests and chiefs, and generally of all persons and things pertaining to the gods and their worship, we find another kind of taboo which in the Semitic field has its parallel in rules of uncleanness. Women after child-birth, men who have touched a dead body and so forth, are temporarily taboo and separated from human society, just as the same persons are unclean in Semitic religion... In most savage societies no sharp line seems to be drawn between the two kinds of taboo just indicated, and even in more advanced nations the notions of holiness and uncleanness often touch. Among the Syrians for example swine's flesh was taboo, but it was an open question whether this was because the animal was holy or because it was unclean... On the other hand the fact that the Semites or at least the northern Semites distinguish between the holy and the unclean, marks a real advance above savagery. All taboos are inspired by awe of the supernatural, but there is a great moral difference between precautions against the invasion of mysterious hostile powers and precautions founded on respect for the prerogative of a friendly god. The former belong to magical superstition – the barrenest of all aberrations, which, being founded only on fear, acts merely as *a bar to progress*... The irrationality of laws of uncleanness, from the standpoint of spiritual religion or even of the higher heathenism, is so manifest that they must necessarily be looked on as having survived from an earlier form of faith and of society.

Like many other early anthropologists (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1990; Jahoda 2009), Robertson Smith makes a comparison between the Semites – in which he tacitly includes both Biblical Hebrews and contemporary Jews – and savages. The former are better than the latter, but still far down the spectrum compared with 'the standpoint of spiritual religion', Protestant Christianity for Robertson Smith (van Oord 2008). What savages and Semites have in common is their beliefs about ritual uncleanness. By contrast, Robertson Smith's 'spiritual religion' regards divinity as rightfully pure, a perspective which results in a love of God and the capacity for rational progress (see Warburg 1989). By contrast, Robertson Smith suggests, both Semites and savages have 'irrational' laws of taboo and uncleanness, rather than recognising in line with

Protestant Christianity and reason that the truly sacred is always pure. The commonalities and differences become stark when this passage from Robertson Smith is compared to the famous page of Durkheim ([1912] 2001: 304-6) on purity and impurity as the two faces of 'the sacred':

Religious forces are of two kinds. Some are benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order, dispensers of life, health, all the qualities that men value...On the other hand, there are negative and impure powers that produce disorder, cause death and illness, and instigate sacrilege... But even as these two aspects of religious life oppose each other, they are closely related. First of all, the both sustain the same relationship with profane things, who must abstain from any relationship with holy things. The impure are no less forbidden than the pure, and they, too, are taken out of circulation, meaning that they are also sacred. To be sure, the two do not evoke the same feelings. Disgust and horror are one thing and respect another. Nonetheless... the nuances of difference between these two attitudes are sometimes so elusive that it is not always easy to determine the state of mind of the faithful. Among certain Semitic peoples, pork was forbidden, but it was not always certain if it was forbidden as an impure thing or as something holy... the pure and impure are not two separate genera but two varieties of the same genus which includes all sacred things. There are two kinds of sacred things, one auspicious, the other inauspicious. And not only is there no discontinuity between these the two forms, but the same object can pass from one to the other without changing its nature. Pure can be made impure, and vice versa. The possibility of these transmutations accounts for the ambiguity of the sacred.

Durkheim first read Robertson Smith's text in 1895, the very period of the Dreyfus affair which led Durkheim to help found the Dreyfusard Ligue pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme to contest anti-Semitism in the French State and in society in the name of universal values (Fournier 2007). This political context can perhaps help sharpen our sense of Durkheim's work in this passage: he was living a context in which powerful discourses made out that 'Jews are a manifestation of the impure; they are "evil and

impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege” (Goldberg 2008: 304). In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim accepts the architecture of Robertson Smith’s theory and some of its narrative, even as he uses universalism to denature its anti-Semitism and eschews the culturally-specific term ‘taboo’. He agrees with Robertson Smith that the texts of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary ethnographic observations observe uncleanness as well as purity as dimensions of religious phenomena. Yet he does not denigrate this as a deviation from the true perspective of Protestant Christianity, in which the sacred is always pure. Instead, he generalises it, universalising ‘the sacred’ as a transhistorical quality that organises any religion, indeed any society. The case of the northern Semites, perplexed by whether they revere pork as holy or unclean, is subverted by Durkheim. Instead of indicating that savages can confuse the two, he sees in this a deeper insight: that purity and impurity are two varieties of the same genus, sacredness. In including impurity as one of the two aspects of the sacred, he places Semitic and ‘primitive religions’ within the same sphere and level as Robertson Smith’s Protestant ‘spiritual religion’.

Yet the account of the ‘ambiguity of the sacred’ was not prised or purchased from Robertson Smith’s text without retaining some remainder. For in practice, the notion of ‘the sacred’ taken by Durkheim from Robertson Smith’s account retained the latter’s asymmetrical privileging of the pure as the primary nature of the sacred, and the impure as primarily associated with the profane. The primary role played by the sacred in his sociology, expressing and socially supporting society, tends to align it with the pure as the symbol of order and wholeness (cf. [1900a] 1992: 159). In his first description of the impure as an aspect of the sacred, Durkheim defines it in part through its capacity to ‘unleash every profanation of sacred things’, implying that the sacred is conceptualised as associated with the pure ([1894] 2002: 304). More generally, when discussing the sacred, he tends to assign it the tacit property of purity, for example: ‘That an impure person may not approach sacred waters is a general principle – whether the impurity is moral or physical is not a distinction made by ancient religion’ ([1894] 2002: 179).

On a few occasions, Durkheim notes this tendency in his work to align the sacred with the pure and the profane with the impure emerging in his narration of the relationship between the sacred and society, and re-asserts the duality of purity and impurity as equal aspects (e.g. [1906] 1953: 36; [1912] 2001: 315-6). Yet the sacred

must almost always be pure since, for Durkheim, it ultimately sustains society. As a result, he offers no more than 'fleeting comments' (Shilling & Mellor 2010: 441) on impurity. As Durkheim explains, justifying this neglect: 'Everything is found in religion, and if it often represents triumph of good over evil, life over death, the powers of light over the powers of darkness, this is because reality is no different. If the relation between these opposite forces were reversed, life would be impossible; whereas in fact it sustains itself' ([1912] 2001: 316).

Arguing against Kant, for whom the notion of 'substance' was an *a priori* category of any human experience, Durkheim ([1898] 1974) had forbidden sociology from using the term 'substance' in his early writings. He believed that such concepts risked reifying phenomena rather than seeking their social conditions of possibility and the range of their social effects (cf. Stedman-Jones 2001: 168, 367). Yet *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 2001: 41, 110, 250) at points expressly theorises 'the sacred' as a 'substance' or 'essence', universally applicable across human life, possessing an inherent ambiguity between purity and impurity in its role as symbol variously for societal order or chaos. As Pickering (1990: 92) explains, such an account implies that 'the sacred is kind of lump which whilst it might change its texture and spread itself in different ways in different societies it is always present and is perpetually maintained'. Durkheim's collaborator and nephew Mauss admitted, in an unpublished manuscript, that Durkheim's reification of 'the sacred' and his conflation of the sacred with the pure worried both him and his colleague Hubert, though they did not want to raise this concern publically (see Martelli 1995; Pickering 2012). Mauss ([1930] 1998: 40) noted that rather than addressing the impure sacred, in the form of magic, in its specificity, 'Durkheim tried to deduce it sociologically from the notion of the sacred. We were never sure that he was right'.

Mauss suggests that Durkheim's focus on social stability meant that the Durkheimian 'sacred' tended to be conceptualised as pure as a symbol of the social order, and in line with the Christian alignment of sacredness and purity. It is therefore addressed – tacitly and, Mauss suggests, in an insufficiently reflective way – as if it were always pure. Mauss argues that this conceptual problem led to a neglect of impure forms of sacredness in Durkheim's thought, and to a tendency to further conflate the impure and the profane. For instance, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, it can be observed that Durkheim situates 'Satan' as 'impure' but the 'black mass' as 'profane'

[[1912] 2001: 42, 316). In 'Two Laws of Penal Evolution' ([1900b] 1978: 173), Durkheim writes: 'the duties which it prescribes for us create obligations towards a personality which infinitely surpasses our own; this is the collective personality which we imagine in its abstract purity or, as most often happens, with the help of truly religious symbols'.

Indeed, Bataille, too, would diagnose a tendency to submerge purity and impurity within 'the sacred' in Durkheimian thought (see Riley 2010; Falasca-Zamponi 2011). He suggests that prior social theorising had conceded too much to Protestant bias in tending to align the sacred with the pure and the profane with the impure:

Christianity could not get rid of impurity altogether, it could not wipe out uncleanness entirely. But it defined the boundaries of the sacred world after its own fashion. In this fresh definition impurity, uncleanness and guilt were driven outside the pale. Impure sacredness was thenceforward the business of the profane world (Bataille [1957] 2007: 121)

In the mix of Enlightenment discourse and Protestant Christianity which characterised thinkers such as Robertson Smith, 'the rational idea is strongly linked to the celestial transcendence of the sacred, matter to diabolic impurity' (Bataille [1947] 1998: 40). This supports the alignment of the sacred with the pure. Bataille highlights the significance of Robertson Smith, whose work represents 'no doubt the oldest... division of the sacred world into two opposing parts'; Bataille criticises Durkheim for the treatment of 'the internal duality of the sacred' in 'his theory, which is limited to a recapitulation of Smith's data'. Bataille concludes, pessimistically from the point of theory, that 'the slippage from the impure sacred to the profane (associated with matter) cannot be avoided' ([1947] 1998: 41). Though he documents that this shift occurred within history and specifically the history of Christianity and of Western Reason, Bataille ([1973] 1989: 69) nonetheless treats as somewhat inevitable that within 'a dominant movement of reflective thought, the divine appears linked to purity, the profane to impurity'. Though revised, the Durkheimian model of the 'ambiguity of the sacred' retains its privilege for Bataille as the paradigm for thinking purity and impurity (see also Caillois [1950] 1959). This position differs from that of Douglas, as we shall now see.

Secular defilement

Looking back in the preface to the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002), Douglas explains part of her interest in purity and impurity as the result of her ethnographic fieldwork in the early 1950s with the Lele of Congo. The Lele moral and symbolic universe is described in the early publications as organised by a series of aligned binary oppositions, shared as a set of tacit assumptions throughout all the members of the bounded society: 'they make analogies between the relations of male to female, man to animal, forest to grassland, and through these analogies a further relation between man and God' ([1955] 1975: 21). Underpinning these different analogies Douglas perceived the fundamental division between animals and humans, a boundary enacted through human expressions of shame and disgust at things that are seen as dirty. Those on the margins of normal society, the magic-wielding sorcerer and the chief, are presumed to have an inverse relationship with this symbolic system, garnering magical power through acts such as concocting charms using excreta in the case of the former, or committing ritual incest in the case of the latter. Douglas also noted that the Lele avoid eating anomalous animals, such as those that move between aquatic and land environments. The exception to the rule is the pangolin, a scaly anteater. The pangolin looks like a fish to the Lele, but lives on land, and is selected as a special object of ritual veneration. In the course of her fieldwork, Douglas' fieldnotes report that her Lele informants directly 'asked [her] to define dirt in England – Not earth, just simply [dirt]. Contrast: idea of dirt, with "good clean mud", etc. Chesterfield "Dirt is any matter displaced", e.g. hair, crowning glory etc. and hair in the soup. But child putting spoon it has licked back in the veg. tureen and told off for being "dirty". "Dirty" is much wider ranger than just "dirt"' (1953, II: 29).

In the 2002 preface Douglas also emphasises that her interest in the topic of purity and impurity as facilitated by her interaction with her teacher-colleagues at Oxford, Mysore Srinivas and Franz Steiner. Srinivas's (1952) *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs* describes the position of the Coorgs within the caste system. They enacted a tight control over the symbolic boundaries of the body, a strategy which aimed to maintain and advance their position in the social hierarchy by appropriating the symbolic indicators of high status, a process famously termed by Srinivas

'Sanskritisation' (1952: 30-3). The text is used in *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002: 152-3) to clinch the argument that the social boundaries of the group as a whole are reflected in the purity classifications used to relate to the integrity of the body. Steiner's (1956) *Taboo* set itself against the influence of theorists such as Robertson Smith, who had depicted taboos on impure phenomena as a secondary and problematic deviation from the original and true form of the sacred as a pure image of divinity. He depicts, therefore, 'the *problem* of taboo as a Victorian invention', and, specifically, as a 'Protestant discovery' (1956: 50). He suggests that 'it is a misunderstanding to apply Durkheim's notion of the sacred and profane' as a sufficient account of classifications of purity and impurity (1956: 41). Rather, he draw upon Lévy-Bruhl to argue for 'taboo concepts as instrumental in classifying and identifying kinds of transgression', and in 'the institutional localisation of danger' (1956: 112, 147). His conclusion was, therefore, rules of defilement play a role in organising the communal response to phenomena that are either 1) seen as transgressive or 2) as dangerous to society as a whole. These ideas generated not only Douglas' title, but also her account in *Purity and Danger* of the use of purity classifications to support the overall cognitive system of a society and to sanction those in marginal or ambiguous social positions (see [1966] 2002: 117-127; Douglas [1968] 1975: 53). Douglas (1999a: 6) later stated that '*Purity and Danger* was conceived and planned according to his teaching'.

Yet another aspect of Douglas's debt to Srinivas and Steiner was that, as well as taking as their academic object the way ritual defilement could serve as a symbolic system used to regulate social life, 'each, as Brahmin and Jew, tried in their daily lives to handle problems of ritual cleanness' ([1966] 2002: xii). Douglas (1999a:4) attributes her first academic interest in the issue of ritual classifications of pure and impure to the weekly Friday Social Anthropology department trips to the King's Arms pub in the late 1940s: both Srinivas and Steiner would refrain from the communal consumption of ham sandwiches – as would Douglas who, as an observant Catholic, did not eat meat on a Friday. This personal engagement with scholars who both lived by and studied issues of ritual purity appears to have been an important spur for Douglas' own reflexive encounter with the issue, and for her later attempt to theorise the topic in comparative perspective. In an interview with Alan MacFarlane (2006), Douglas retrospectively noted that her framework for discussing purity drew powerfully from the Catholicism of her upbringing, and was stimulated by the saliency of the issue of the significance and

value of ritual in contemporary debates within Anglo-Catholicism (a link drawn at the time by Leach 1971: 45).

The encounter with Srinivas and Steiner, together with her own Catholicism and fieldwork observations, can be seen as having primed Douglas ([1966] 2002: 9) to start *Purity and Danger* by contesting the view, 'very widely held' by modern Western scholars, that 'holiness and impurity are at opposite poles' in religious systems. In an article for *New Society* written just prior to work on *Purity and Danger*, Douglas suggested that 'it was partly a matter of words and definitions. If in European languages the idea of the holy or the sacred was taken as essential defilable and not defiling, how could the same term be applied to an exotic concept which partly contradicted its meaning? How can a thing be holy and unclean at the same time?' emerges as a question and problem within a framework within which the sacred is presumed to always be pure (Douglas [1964] 2013: 138). The assumptions underpinning this question, however, are not only culturally contingent but moralising: 'In short, Durkheim took over two skewed concepts from Robertson Smith and added a third. First, he took over the idea of savage irrationality, so that certain elements of behaviour [such as ritual in modern society] were left unanalysable. Second, he took over the ethical view of religion [which implied that the sacred as the symbol of society would ultimately be pure], with its unanalysable primitive residue. His own contribution to the boulder-strewn path was to leave us with the idea of "the Sacred", a substantive reified' ([1964] 2013: 140). As a result, she describes Durkheim's account of sacredness and contamination as 'quite wrong', verging on 'deluded' ([1964] 2013: 141: see also Douglas [1968] 1975).

Chapter 1 of *Purity and Danger* positions her task as no less than to do some housekeeping of Durkheimian theory, purifying it thoroughly of its roots in Robertson Smith. She urges that an adequate account of purity and impurity cannot be developed 'without first rubbing the slate clean of... preconceptions which derive... from Robertson Smith' ([1966] 2002: 27), whose thought she later described as a key part of a set of anthropological assumptions animated by a 'muddled mixture of scientism, sanctimonious theology, and nineteenth-century complacency' (1999a: 7). Whether directly derived from Robertson Smith or from this more general set of assumptions, in *Purity and Danger* Douglas observes that it is widely 'supposed to be a mark of primitive religion to make no clear distinction between sanctity and uncleanness' (ibid.). She

contends that this assumption results in a circular logic. A 'primitive religion' becomes defined as one that treats 'the sacred' as capable of impure form. At the same time, the fact that it is only 'primitive religions' which contradict anthropological/Protestant dogma is used to dismiss further investigation of the particular social operation of purity and impurity classifications. Looking back, Douglas (1999a: 12) remarks that the problem was that 'they disapproved of beliefs in defilement as unacceptably primitive, while they approved of the transmission of sacred power through blessings, while never troubling to work out why one was "the lowest form of superstition", and the other was modern and a good'.

When societies were observed which assigned religious significance to defilement, in *Purity and Danger* Douglas ([1966] 2002: 21) observed two strategies used by prior anthropologists for interpreting these practices whilst retaining the assumption that holiness and impurity rightfully distinct. A first is to regard practices in which uncleanness has religious significance as mere 'magical superstition'; she cites Robertson Smith. The second strategy she mentions is the idea of the 'the ambivalence of the sacred'. Yet she levels at Durkheim the criticism that his account leaves impure phenomena within the religious sphere, such as magic, rather neglected. However, more importantly, she argues that Durkheim's account renders the operation of pollution beliefs utterly invisible within secular discourses – including, for example, our own beliefs about hygiene. Interestingly, this was a problem which Levy-Bruhl had also started to recognise in his late notebooks, unpublished at the time Douglas was writing – though Douglas ([1968] 1975: 50) herself discerned trends in this direction already from his earlier writings. In his previous work Levy-Bruhl's argument had been that 'neither dirt nor contagion has for primitive men the same positive sense that they have for us'; by contrast, in his final writings he acknowledges that 'I see more and more clearly that the distinction between the two sorts of experience cannot be maintained' (1975: 186-8). Similarly observing the difficulties caused for anthropology by a categorical division between modern hygiene and religious pollution discourses, Douglas ([1966] 2002: 27) states that 'these problems did not interest Durkheim. He followed Robertson Smith' in presuming that 'the rules which he called hygienic are without their load of social symbolism'.

Purity and Danger is thus both loyal and disloyal to Durkheim. On the one hand, Durkheim's elevation of Semitic and savage religion to the same level as Protestant

Christianity is further expanded by Douglas, who includes secular discourses within the very same analytical lens as religious discourses, 'spiritual' or otherwise. All are considered in terms of the function of their classifications for achievement of social order. However, in doing so Douglas makes two important moves with respect to Durkheim's account of the sacred. The first is that she attends very pointedly to the relative neglect of the impure aspect of the sacred, correcting what she perceives as a lack of attention to this topic. Douglas gives an account of how societies can incorporate the unclean phenomenon within a narrative that venerates it as a symbol, such as using it to represent the role of 'evil and death' within the 'grand, unifying pattern' of life ([1966] 2002: 49-50). Douglas' biographer points out that this insistence on the capacity of the sacred for pure and impure aspects can be regarded as in part the heritage of her familiarity with and commitment to 'Roman Catholic imagery' (Fardon 2002: 155).

However, perhaps the more significant move is that Douglas identifies and analyses the role of purity and impurity in a domain from which Durkheim's theory excluded them: the profane. 'Ritual Uncleaness', the next chapter of *Purity and Danger*, presents the theoretical discovery of 'Secular Defilement'. Durkheim associated 'the profane' with labour ([1912] 2001: 228), women ([1912] 2001: 107, 227), materiality and especially the materiality of the body ([1912] 2001: 325; [1914] 1973: 159), activities that are lower in 'prestige' and 'dignity' ([1906] 1953: 29; [1912] 2001: 37), and with activities conducted regularly by individuals rather than collectively on special days of the calendar ([1900a] 1992: 55; [1912] 2001: 229). Yet Douglas states that themes of purity and impurity were made salient *precisely* in a profane and secular domain with every one of these characteristics: the efforts of her housework, which she recognised as full of symbolically-laden classifications of purity and defilement. Douglas (1999a: 19) later stated that she regarded the use of 'secular as well as religious examples' of how pollution practices worked as a potentially 'liberating' theoretical move with respect to contemporary anthropological understanding.

She recounts that her husband had a low tolerance for dirt in the home whereas 'I am personally rather tolerant of disorder', making it a hot issue for conversation in the course of running their home ([1966] 2002: viii, 2). Yet it was not simply that the standards of Jim and Mary Douglas were higher and lower respectively, but part of the discussions in the Douglas home focused on different standards. For example 'Mary and

Janet learnt from the nuns of the Sacred Heart that there were places where things like hairbrushes belonged, and they certainly should not be found anywhere else' (Fardon 2002: 151).

When we honestly reflect on our busy scrubblings and cleanings in this light we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house ([1966] 2002: 85).

The growth of *Purity and Danger* out of reflections on the 'busy scrubblings' of housework ([1966] 2002: 85) contribute to a strong antipathy on the part of Douglas to Durkheim's attempt to restrict purity and impurity to aspects of 'the sacred'. Looking back, Douglas ([2002] 2013: 29) reflects that 'the main intention of *Purity and Danger* was to join up certain threads that should never have been broken. The cut that had separated us, moderns from primitives, had to be repaired. Another cut wrongly separated religious speculations in metaphysics and theology from the daily lives and practice of the worshipers'. Just before starting to write *Purity and Danger* she wrote: 'Since the old approach to taboo via religion and the idea of the sacred has been beset with confusion, the new approach should be through the idea of defilement in a secular sense' ([1964] 2013: 140). Douglas therefore calls the first chapter following her literature review 'Secular Defilement', to highlight the inadequacy of the notion of 'the sacred' as an account for diversity of themes of purity and impurity in everyday social practices. The significance that Douglas ([1966] 2002: 85) finds in the discursive activity that we enact 'as we push the Hoover around, wipe grease off kitchen surfaces or squirt bleach into the toilet' is a fundamental theoretical move. Considerations of purity and impurity after Douglas have often therefore begun with the topic of 'busy scrubblings' (e.g. Forde et al. 2011: 38), using housecleaning as an experience-near way into the topic rather than in awareness of the theoretical stakes within Durkheimian theory that led Douglas to highlight housekeeping as evidence of secular defilement.

Matter out of place

Douglas' change to Durkheim's theory cross-cut the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, and any division between religious and secular discourses. Yet Douglas retained the Durkheimian assumption that cherished symbols express and affirm the structure of society in its totality. She proposed that phenomena which contravened such classifications would be designated by society as impure:

Is this really the difference between ritual pollution and our ideas of dirt: are our ideas hygienic and theirs are symbolic? Not a bit of it: I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail... the old definition of dirt as matter out of place [is] a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. When there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements... It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table... In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications (Douglas 1966: 48).

As Fardon (1999: 84) has noted, *Purity and Danger* presents 'a potentially bewildering richness of both constructive and critical arguments'. One of the reasons for this is that Douglas seems rather aware that the old definition of dirt as matter out of place, whilst suggestive, does not always hold and cannot be the final word on the topic. Commenting on her attempt to make this qualification in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1999: 11) later came to 'admit it was often expressed ambiguously'. Anttonen (2004: 113), too, has observed that in some places in *Purity and Danger* there is there is a lack of conceptual precision regarding the relationship between the construct of 'purity' and the ideas of 'the sacred' or the 'holy'.

Douglas attributes the phrase 'dirt is matter out of place' to Lord Chesterton's 1852 remark at the Royal Agricultural Society that 'I have heard it said that dirt is nothing but a thing in a wrong place'; proximally, however, Douglas' reference comes from William James' (1901: 129) *The Varieties of Religious Experience* who in fact used

the phrase 'matter out of place' rather than 'in a wrong place', and who is quoted doing so on page 203 of *Purity and Danger*. The quote, however, cuts off with ellipses James' insistence that this theory cannot be the whole story, and only applies under some circumstances. This would suggest that Douglas was aware, whether from James or from other sources, of the long-standing history of criticism of Chesterton's aphorism as a heuristic. To give but one example, in his *Hellenism and Christianity* (1921: 144), E.R. Bevan argued that the idea that dirt is "'Matter in the wrong place" plainly' cannot be sufficient since 'if the field of the disagreeable and the noxious extends in one direction beyond that of the polluting, it is equally true that we regard a good deal as dirt, which we could not show to be particularly noxious or painful. The two fields overlap, but they do not coincide.' Whether from James, some awareness of this longer tradition of criticism, or from her own reasoning, no more than a few pages after proffering 'dirt is matter out of place' as a theory of purity and impurity, Douglas goes on to identify that there are 'various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events' besides classifying them as impure ([1966] 2002: 39).

One 'provision' mentioned by Douglas for dealing with anomalies and ambiguities without recourse to purity/impurity classifications is, simply, to reclassify the phenomenon to make it no longer ambiguous or anomalous. Another is to eliminate the phenomenon before any need to classify it as impure arises; where there are sufficient sanctions to eliminate the phenomenon or back in line, Douglas is adamant that purity and impurity discourses need not be employed, but will only appear when these sanctions require legitimating or bolstering (see Douglas 1980). Yet another case, mentioned elsewhere in the text, is that when matter has fully decomposed and lost even the ghost of identity, it no longer evokes a classification as impure ([1966] 2002: 197). In her article on 'Pollution', written shortly after *Purity and Danger*, Douglas ([1968] 1975: 56-7) specifies the significance of culture and epistemology in varying how and where purity and impurity classifications occur: 'our culture trains us to believe that anomalies are only due to a temporary inadequate formulation of general natural laws' but that 'other ways of dividing up and evaluating reality are conceivable', and will impact upon how we perceive 'anything which seems to defy the apparently implicit categories of the universe'. For instance, Douglas ([1968] 1975: 58) specifies that there is no necessary association between impurity and either disgust or horror – as later readers of Douglas and considerations of impurity have widely presumed, such

as Kristeva. Such limitations on Douglas' proposal that 'dirt is matter out of place' were elaborated in *Natural Symbols* (1970), in the consideration of contexts in which order is more or less at stake. Yet despite the limitations already acknowledged in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas states in ending the chapter on 'Secular Defilement' that the value of the 'matter out of place' paradigm is that it represents a step beyond prior theory, which had excluded purity and impurity from profane and secular discourses: 'to recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves us in no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular. The same principle applies throughout' ([1966] 2002: 50).

To clinch her argument against Robertson Smith and his influence on Durkheim, it was then logical for Douglas in the subsequent chapter to use her account to show the logic of the very Semitic ritual laws which Robertson Smith had denigrated as aberrations of thought: 'When Robertson Smith applied the ideas of primitive, irrational and unexplainable to some parts of the Hebrew religion they remained thus labelled and unexamined to this day' ([1966] 2002: 57). This chapter was first delivered as a set of Lunch Hour Lectures at UCL in 1959, and was 'filled with notes taken from Franz Steiner's *Taboo*' (Fardon 2002: 154), in which the influence of Robertson Smith is the antagonist and, indeed, characterised as himself *a bar to progress* in anthropological theory. Douglas' demonstration of the greater acuity of her account precisely on Robertson Smith's terrain of Semitic religion resulted in the game-changing application of her paradigm to 'the Abominations of Leviticus'. Rather than conceptualising the prohibition on pork as the result of a confused relationship with the sacred (as in Robertson Smith, and in Durkheim), Douglas notes that this prohibition obeys a logic in that pigs breach the classificatory system of the text for species of animals. This work 'laid the theoretical foundation for all subsequent work on ritual impurity in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, virtually every academically oriented treatment of impurity in ancient Israel since 1966 has built on Douglas's work in some way' (Klawans 2000: 8).

It is also possible to view Douglas' renewed attention to Leviticus in *Leviticus as Literature* (1999b) as partly a return to her polemic with Robertson Smith. Introducing the book, she cites Roberson Smith's (1894: xlv) statement that Biblical studies had reached 'a point where nothing of vital importance for the historical study of the Old Testament religion remains uncertain'. She criticises Smith, since his view cannot explain why 'a people make a clean sweep of their old religion and adopt overnight a

radical, puritanical, egalitarian basis' (1999b: 6). She diagnoses in Robertson Smith a religious desire to 'reach back' to the origin in order to find the true meaning (1999b: 8), and reprises her criticism of his view that discourses of impure sacredness in the Hebrew Bible reveal the moral backwardness of the Hebrews compared to the Protestant knowledge that the sacred is pure. Against Robertson Smith, she insists that 'there is no justification for the moral evolutionism' at the basis of his account (1999b: 8). She emphasises that 'the Abomination of Leviticus' are not regarded as bad; the prohibition of their slaughter for food was a particular way of offering them protection, as different but equal with other creatures in creation: 'impure was not originally a term of vilification' (1999: 145). Purity/impurity, she argues, should be distinguished both from the axis sacred/profane and from the axis good/bad.

Conclusion

"Each dominant theory blocks out other kinds of questions"

Douglas, 'An Aesthetic View' ([2008] 2013: 177)

Attention to the 'opening question' of *Purity and Danger* offers a new perspective on the text, as a response to the state of a debate between Robertson Smith and Durkheim regarding the theoretical status of impurity – within and outside the sacred realm. Durkheim had reconfigured Robertson Smith's account, treating purity and impurity as dimensions of a universal quality of religious life specifically and of societies generally: the sacred. Douglas accepts Durkheim's conclusion, that cherished symbols express and affirm the structure of society as a totality. However, she disagreed that purity and impurity could be reduced to aspects of the sacred, and she highlighted their significance as symbols within housework, as a decidedly profane domain of life. In doing so, Douglas opened up purity and impurity as a field of theoretical inquiry in their specificity.

Douglas ([1966] 2002: 44) proposes that 'outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; underclothing appearing where overclothing should be... our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications'. This idea, captured in the phrase that 'dirt is matter out of place', was not proffered as the totalising or definitive theory it has been understood to be by those reading the claims of *Purity and Danger* outside their

theoretical context. Douglas fully and explicitly recognised the inadequacy of this as a general account within pages of citing the phrase. Instead, the idea that impurity would attend transgressions of cherished boundaries was deployed as an attempt to slice open the Durkheimian division between sacred and profane, to open the possibility for new theory attending to purity and impurity in their specificity. In part because the stakes of Douglas' argument have been missed, this possibility has not been explored to the extent that it can or should be. Since the conventional place to put discussions of purity and impurity, under the rubric of 'the sacred', risks flattening these themes, there has not been the robust containing framework which generally facilitates cumulative theoretical attention to a topic (see Zysman 2012). As Douglas (1999: 12) herself observed in dismay, 'Robertson Smith still reigns in most scholarly works', and Campkin (2007: 79) concluded in his review of work on purity and impurity since Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, 'the topic as a whole has been under theorized since the book's publication'. This observation matches that Kristeva (2004: 155), whose elaborations on and debates with Douglas I have considered elsewhere, who notes that her 'investigation into abjection... picks up on a certain vacuum' (Duschinsky 2013a).

Surveying the contemporary field, Graham (2007) and Osbaldiston and Petray (2011) have argued that subsuming purity and impurity as merely aspects of 'the sacred' has been to the detriment of both the development of anthropological theory and to the empirical analysis of defiling or polluted phenomena. Sustained attention to purity and impurity in their specificity, which a reading of Douglas' work in context facilitates, manifestly and significantly reveals that it is only some mixtures or transgressions of cherished boundaries which have the effect of eliciting purity/impurity codings. When 'upstairs things [are] downstairs', to take one of Douglas' illustrations, matter is indeed out of place – but impurity is not generally mobilised as the appropriate discursive framing. Such attention to the logic of purity and impurity within particular discourses helps hold open a potentially fruitful research agenda for anthropological theory, addressing cultural and historical variation both in notions of purity/impurity and in the kinds of classifications which elicit them. Beyond any synchronic analysis, Douglas' analysis presents us with the question of when, actually, is dirt matter out of place? Or again, phrased differently, what must we assume about place, precisely, for this phrase to hold true?

‘Dirt is matter out of place’ undoubtedly identifies an important regularity. Elsewhere colleagues and I have worked to respond to Douglas’s call for work to refine this theory. Our method has been to interrogate secular themes of ‘purity’ in greater depth. In this, we have worked in the space carved out by *Purity and Danger* for sustained analysis of purity/impurity, but departing markedly from the common strategy of subsequent theorists, who have tended to focus primary attention on impurity, and treat purity as merely the absence of impurity (e.g. Kristeva [1980] 1982; Moore 2000). We have also worked to examine the specific content given to the idea of purity in hegemonic Western and global discourses on nationalism, femininity and childhood (Duschinsky & Lampitt 2012; Duschinsky 2013b;). We suggest that ‘dirt is matter out of place’ in such discourses when ‘place’ is conceptualised as qualitatively homogenous and corresponding to some pre-existing truth or essence. We have explored the history of such ideas in early and middle Platonism, in Christianity, and in later Western thought (Duschinsky & Robson 2013). Yet, like Douglas, we have also worked to explore purity in cross-cultural perspective. Whereas Douglas places emphasis on classificatory systems, we have explored the materiality of the image of purity as the reason for the family resemblances which can be discerned in its use between cultures. This approach was already implied in Douglas’s language and metaphors, if not the dominant thread of her argument. For instance, we have examined the association between purity and whiteness, facilitated but not determined by the fact that ‘the uniformity of whiteness can be used to signify qualitative homogeneity, its emptiness can be mobilised to signify a transparent correspondence between phenomena or forms of subjectivity and their originary state, and the immediate visibility of any mark suggests a fragile vulnerability which makes any deviation already of great magnitude’ (Duschinsky & Brown 2013).

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